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AUTHOR Svec, Henry; Bechard, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes a model which combines traditional metacognitive explanations for the acquisition of social skills in behaviorally disordered adolescents with situationally specific environment variables. Research is reported suggesting that newly learned social skills may not generalize to a wider variety of real life situations because social ability is specific to situation and task demands. The "meta-behavioral" model stresses the need to consider such variables as situational characteristics, task demands, and personal characteristics in predicting and improving the social skills performance of this population. (Author/DB)

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SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR BEHAVIOR DISORDERED STUDENTS: A META-BEHAVIORAL MODEL

BY

HENRY SVEC
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

JOSEPH BECHARD
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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RUNNING HEAD: A Meta-Behavioral Model for Social Skills Training

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Abstract

A model is introduced which combines traditional metacognitive explanations for the acquisition of social skills with situationally specific environment variables. This "meta-behavioral" model suggests the need to consider such variables as situational characteristics, task demands, and personal characteristics in predicting social performance. Use of this model may benefit professionals attempting to improve the social skills performance of behaviorally disordered children.

The passage of Public Law 94.142, the Education of all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, has had a significant affect on the public school system by requiring programming for a large number of students identified as having significant learning, behavioral, and/or emotional problems. Perhaps the most difficult of these categories to program for is that of the behaviorally disorded adolescent. Such students manifest behaviors that are unacceptable to both other students and teachers. These behaviors tend to bring them a considerable amount of attention from the staff and inhibit socially appropriate peer interaction. This student tends to be referred more often than other students who in fact may actually possess the same academic strengths and/or weaknesses, yet whose behavior does not bother the teacher (Ysseldyke & Thurlow, 1984). In a national survey of regular education teachers Ysseldyke et al., 1983, reported that teachers expected the results of a referral to be assessment and/or placement, few teachers asked for intervention ideas to help students to stay in the regular clasroom. In fact, the chances of a student being placed in a special program once he is referred is 72% (Algozzine, Christenson, & Ysseldyke, 1982). PL 94.142 requires a least restrictive environment when programming for students identified as having some deficit which suggests that these students will need to to be considered for mainstreaming at some time during their schooling. How can we provide the necessary training so as to best insure the skills that will be developed within the individualized program will generalize back to the general student population?

Students at all levels are faced with many social situations every day. Secondary school settings place complex demands on adolescents and these demands for successful performances, both academically and socially, increase yearly.

Loper (1980) suggested that a core problem within special education populations is the idea of strategy-deficiencies. She stated that some students may be deficient or delayed in awareness of social learning strategies. Kagan and Kagan (1970) stated that different behaviors in different situations are the result of the particular cognitive process employed by the student.

A number of studies have reported benefits of social skills training for adolescents (Warrengeltz, 1981; Brown & Greenspan, 1984), although the newly acquired social skills have not generalized beyond the experimental situation. While cognitive deficits may contribute to this maladaption (Shantz, 1983), factors within the social context must also contribute to adequate functioning.

The need for adequate social skills in children is well documented. Strain (1981) reported that social skill deficits left unattended become more debilitating as time goes on. The development of intellectual, language, and other related skills may become inhibited as a result of social skill deficits (Guralnick, 1981; Hartup, 1980). Social skill deficits have also been identified as the single most significant predictor of adjustment problems in adulthood (Roff, 1961). The development of appropriate social skills has been reported to be an important link to mental efficiency (Crockett, 1983), school performance (Wolfe, 1983), and later adult adjustment (Leone, 1984). Aggressive adolescents have difficulties in developing social relationships as a result of developmental delays in cognitive acquisitions, non-egocentric functioning, empathy and moral reasoning.

The lack in development of, and transfer of, adequate social skills is one of the most significant programming weaknesses within special education

for this population. We believe that it is this deficit that keeps students identified behaviorally disordered from being more successful in a wider variety of social situations.

This paper proposes to develop a theoretical framework to explain why newly learned social skills may not generalize to a wider variety of real life situations.

For the purposes of this paper, social skills, sometimes referred to as social cognition or social ability, is defined as positive behaviors that are at least minimally acceptable according to societal norms, and that are not harmful to others (Combs, 1977). Meta-behavior refers to "thinking about behaving" and is introduced in this paper as person and situation monitoring by the individual in a social setting. Although not new, viewing social behavior from a multi-modal perspective may assist those engaged in social skills training.

The Acquisition of Social Ability

Flavell (1977b) indicates that like cognitive development, social cognition includes spatial and temporal centrations, invariant formations, quantitative thinking, meta-cognition, abstract and hypothetical thinking. Shantz (1983) also implies a close link between nonsocial and social cognition. While these cognitive factors may affect the acquisition of appropriate social skills, we are proposing a more situation-specific approach, based on the social context of social learning. The research indicates that social ability is specific to situation and task demands. A number of studies (Brown, 1984; Kazdin, 1984, Gallagher, 1983) have evaluated the use of social strategy training for nonassertive and (Chandler, 1983; Dodge, 1980; Saranson & Saranson, 1981)

aggressive adolescents. The results of these studies imply that while social ability is improved following the treatment phase (social skills training), the social ability does not generalize to real-life situations. It may be that although the adolescent can learn the appropriate social skills through the use and dependence on nonsocial cognitive attributes, there are specific meta-behavioral,or thinking about behaving variables, that may effect their generalization and utilization to other situations. Although the nonsocial cognitive factors may be used as tools to help the student develop socially, they are not exclusive characteristics of this development. We believe that it is this "meta-behavioral" deficit that helps keep students identified behaviorally disordered from being more successful in a wider variety of social situations.

The Meta-behavioral Model

Figure 1 presents the meta-behavioral model as an explanation for the development of social skills for aggressive adolescents.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Situation variables are definded by the complexity and diversity of the situation and are based on environmental characteristics and task demands. Environmental characteristics would include the context of the action, type of audience, and familiarity with the social setting. Environmental characteristics interact with person variables to affect the individual's confidence within the specific social situation. Task demands imply the nature of the social task and the

motives of the individual. Calling up a girl to get help with homework would require specific social skills, but calling up that same girl to ask for a date would require somewhat different skills.

Person variables are dependent on personal attributes and strategies. Strategies would include specific techniques to improve social performance. The emphasis for change among social maladaptive adolescents has concentrated on this phase of social development. Strategies often used include modeling and role playing with live actors or by viewing video tapes (Chandler, 1973) of appropriate social action.

A recent study indicates that strategy training should also include the teaching of behavioral principles to students. Nussen (1977) using 8th and 9th grade adolescents during three fifty-minute training sessions to teach the student behavioral principles and their method of application to classroom situations, concluded that the students improved in social ability as a result of the training but that this training did not generalize to classroom situations. It may be that a small sample (n=14) and methodological factors affected the results, or it may be that strategy training necessary is a small part of the remediation necessary for the improvement of social ability and not an isolated solution.

Summary

This model suggests an integration between personal and environmental variables in order to improve social performance. This implies that social skills training should include training the adolescent to assess situation characteristics, task demands, personal attributes, confidence, prediction

of succcess, the estimation of task demands, predicting outcomes, and monitoring success. Strategy training, although important, would be a small part of the social skills training and while cognitive development may provide specific tools for the students to use, it is situation specific social variables that will predict successful social performance.

Aggressive adolescents have difficulty generalizing newly learned social skills to real life situations. The meta-behavioral model of social performance suggests that while nonsocial cognition is important for social development, situation specific and person variables may determine individual social performance and only be viewing social skills training through a multi-variable context can we begin to improve the socialization behaviors for this specific population. Presently, research is continuing to investigate and further define the specific properties identified as factors within this model with implications to social skills training and treatment for special populations.

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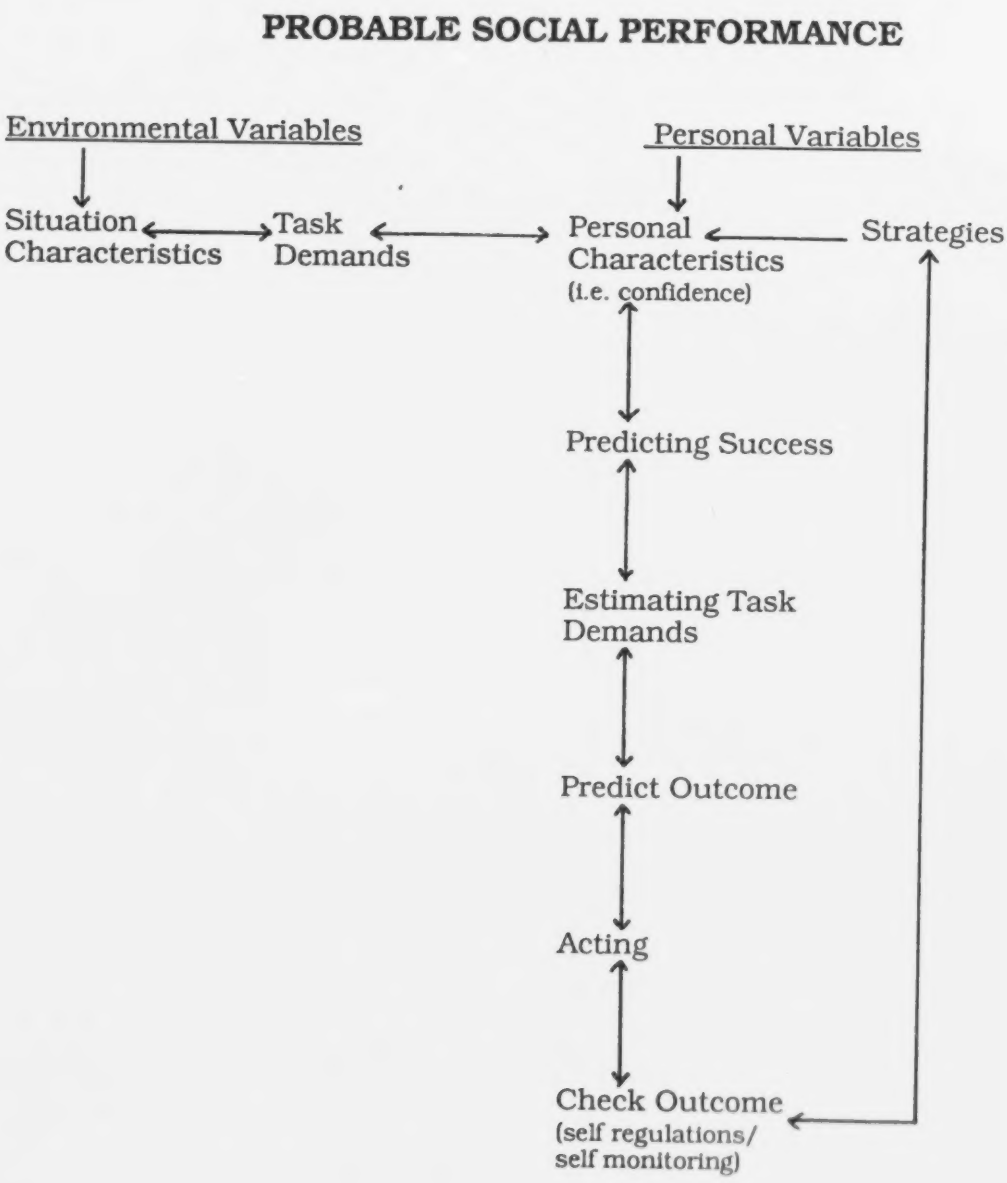

Figure 1. The Meta-Behavioral model of social performance